

89th Medium Tank Battalion

The U.S. War Department had to cobble together armament and supplies, from wherever it could, to support this undeclared military action. SPC Robert Vallejos saw first-hand the challenges American soldiers had to deal with; from wrong or lacking personal gear to non-working tanks. After completing intelligence gathering for 25th Head Quarters (HQ), Vallejos was reassigned to the point of the spear – the 89th Medium Tank Battalion.

As we looked over some of his war photos, he pointed out one where his back was to the camera; wearing a long winter coat; directing a M4 Sherman tank.

“That’s me standing there, showing them how to get that tank off of that mountain. I got him in the ditch where he belongs, (because) where I’m standing it’s about 500 ft. straight down. (In fact) 3 tanks went down there. We had the wrong treads...we had peacetime tracks or shoes. The track is the whole ball of wax that makes the tank run. But a shoe is part of that (like a link in a watch band). They’re supposed to have; like snow tires have; dimples all over it. (Those are) your winter treads you’re supposed to have in combat. So if you hit ice or frozen ground, you’re not going to slip and slide all over the damn place. As long as I was with the 89th they never had (the proper) tread on them tanks. We lost more damn tanks through stupidity. We even had one tank that came (over) with all the wiring out of it! ...that was Korea.”



It’s one thing to be on the outside of a tank looking in: quite another to be thrown into one and not knowing how to get out. SPC Vallejos, all 6’2” of him, was assigned as gunner.

“They assigned me (as gunner in) a tank, and Sgt Major Cook says, ‘That’s your tank, you’re responsible for it. If something happens to the tank commander... (you’re) second in command.’ If I don’t know how to use that gun – everybody dies! I was the most scared little rabbit you ever saw. I knew NOTHING about a damn tank. I got in there and says, ‘how the hell does this tank work?’ I was literally living in that tank. I asked for a manual, (but) nobody knew what a manual was. (The) tankers took basic training in a tank. Of course, the 89th were all tankers, they were born with the damn tank!”

“So, I cried a lot at night. I lived in that tank. I was afraid to sleep with everybody else, cause I had to learn about that tank. (Here) I was in combat and didn’t even know how the hell to fire the damn thing. I found a lot of buttons, and I’d hear a click, but what the hell did that click represent?! I didn’t even know how the damn thing sounded! When they would fire it up, Jesus Christ, I was really getting nervous. I had to figure everything out. (I had) only one advantage, I knew what that gun was. I had taken artillery training in both light and heavy artillery. I knew how to align and set my sites with the barrel ... but (first) I had to get rid of the Cosmoline.”

“Cosmoline is the preservative the government uses to prevent rust on battleships, carriers, etc. It is the stickiest, raunchiest crap I ever knew. It took me 5 days to get rid of that Cosmoline - to get it out of the barrel. Nothing, not even gasoline cuts it. But I got it all out...then (I find) the damn scope is foggy. (For some reason) you couldn’t see (thru it) the way you’re supposed to. Well, thank God I knew a little about polishing rocks! I literally made my own polishing powder out of dirt. It (took out) the very fine sand pitting (from the lens). I think I did a pretty damn good job.”

Then arrives the man that will torment SPC Vallejos nightmares for decades to come:
Lt. Francis G. Nordstrom.

Lt. Nordstrom was a liaison officer from 25th Infantry Division with the Turkish Brigade. He was assigned to the 89th Med. Tank Battalion, “D. Company”, and chose SPC Vallejos’ tank, the “Dare Devil Express,” as his lead tank. The M4 Sherman tank had a broad, sloped front hull that provided ample room for “war paint”. Glaring eyes and sharp bared fangs graced Vallejos’ tank. Nordstrom becomes tank commander and Vallejos’ immediate nemesis. Friction arose between the shave tail lieutenant and the veteran WWII tank commander Sgt Maj Cook.

“God bless him, he’s the one who got me promoted. (Cook) fought Nordstrom till hell wouldn’t have it. I could hear them screamin way the hell up on the hill where I was. Cook told Nordstrom, ‘I will not have a gunner that doesn’t have the rank to go with the position!’ Nordstrom says, ‘he’s nothing but a frickin dumb ass indian! What the hell you gonna give him the rank for?’ Cook said, ‘cause he’s gonna protect (your) ass, that’s why!’ “

“So I got a field promotion, to Sargent First Class (SFC). Nordstrom says, ‘Well, we’ll see how good he is...you see that tiny tree way over there...’ That (tree) was a good 1100 yards away. I could only make it out in my scope as about (2”) tall. You couldn’t see the trunk, even in my scope, (so) I just aimed right at the center of that sucker. I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch if I didn’t chop it down! I was the happiest guy you ever saw! Well, it works no different than artillery. Then I was happy!”

Lt. Nordstrom grudgingly took SFC Vallejos as his tank gunner from then on. He perched on top of the Dare Devil Express - bound for (self) glory. As SFC Vallejos became more familiar with his position as tank gunner, he was also making new friends.

“Did I ever tell you what the Australians did to me, because I called them ‘Limey’s’? Jesus Christ! They beat the hell out of me! Then after they got done beating (on) me, the big bouncer, bruiser guy that they had, picked me up and said, “We love ya anyhow, yank! We’s gonna get ya a pot of Gee!’ Here they go, they literally carried me over to their little camp. They’ve got a real neat, individual camp stove that don’t leave no

smoke or anything. Really neat. But (our) damn country don't think of them kinds of things for us guys. If you're not an officer, you don't get shit...but a good dose of trench foot and frostbite."

The initial objective for the 89th Med. Tank Battalion was the capture of Pongyang; North Korea's capital; by mid-October 1950. The long trek from Pusan; on the southeastern shore heading north, was met with constant resistance by the occupying North Koreans. SFC Vallejos describes the loss of one of the tanks he was substitute gunner in.

"Let me tell you another story...about the second tank I lost. (An) enemy gunner tried to put (a round) right through (my) scope. That's who you wanna kill is the gunner, to hell with everybody else. But he put his sites a little too low, and what he did, he hit right where the gears are that make the turret turn around. It locked the turret; you couldn't do shit with it. They put an incendiary in there... [Bob's voice lowers] put us on fire...ah, Jesus Christ [voice rises]. Then we tried to open the escape hatch; in the floor of the tank; but it was froze solid. That damn hatch had been closed since, I guess WWII. Jesus Christ! Anyway...it was getting hotter in there, you couldn't touch anywhere, the metal was too damn hot. We couldn't figure where the hell we got hit. The loader, the one who loads the shells into the breech, he opened the damn ammo box, pulled out a big artillery shell and WHOOM! WHOOM! WHOOM!"

My surprise caused me to interject loudly -

"He's using the butt end of the shell?!" I gasped.

"Not the butt end."

"The pointy end!!!"

"Yes! Well, what the hell, it was better than burnin up. But he got that hatch open, and what the hell does he do? He threw that damn shell right (out) the trap door!"

Unfortunately, gunner Vallejos became the only survivor, as the crew bailed out from the burning tank. While trying to get away before the ammo inside blew - enemy machine gun fire cut them down. The tank commander took a direct hit in the head with shrapnel, thus leaving Vallejos next in command, and the last man out of the tank. Hearing the machine gun fire, Vallejos froze under the burning tank, long enough for the enemy to abandon their kill. He hid nearby for a day and a half; before retrieving the dog tags of the men he fought beside; then worked his way back to friendly lines.

"After it got dark I went back and got all the dog tags. One went in the mouth and I had to turn in the other. We have little notebooks with indelible pencils...you printed the names, rank, serial numbers and grid coordinates. Then turned them in to the 'fuckinary guys' we called um. The ones that pick up the dead bodies and throw um in the back of a 6 x 6. The bad part is...it was the tank commander's responsibility to write to the parents and tell um how their kids...how their kids wound up bein taken."

As Robert was telling me these stories, they still affected him.

"I sleep a lot in this chair. I have a hard time (because) I get claustrophobic...from what happened in that tank. I couldn't get out and we were on fire...there's no windows. I've been claustrophobic ever since...that's why

I gotta have windows, especially in the bedroom. Cause when I have nightmares, that's the first thing I look for...war does horrible things to ya."

Of all the horrors, chaos and inhumanity Robert endured since his induction into the Army, it was the loss of his closest friend "Jackie" that hurt him the most.

"We went through basic (training) together. He was a little shit, a wop this tall (5'7"ish) and wore a 4 1/2 shoe! We became like brothers, and uh, he was a stubborn little shit. We were actually called Mutt and Jeff. He was the only person who ever knocked me out. We were at one of the hangers in (Camp) Chitose. We were sparring and I didn't even see it coming. I didn't feel it. All I know I was flat on the concrete!"

"Alberto (Jackie) Guttera, was from Rochester, NY. He was a mischievous little kid and I loved him for it. He had a good soul...and God needed him right away. I miss that guy...and...ah, shit...I don't wanna talk about it; I don't wanna start cryin again..."

Jackie was shot in the head by a sniper...as he was talking to Robert.

While recovering from his wounds in the hospital, Robert gave himself a tattoo on the back of his right hand. Three Japanese symbols that spelled "Rob" beneath the name "Jackie". He carried that horrible reminder for the rest of his life.



This photo was taken at the 279th Army Hospital, Osaka, Japan.

SFC Vallejos is sitting in a wheelchair.

He is 19 years old.